LOS ANGELES
BUSINESS JOURNAL
A SCRIPPS HOWARD BUSINESS PUBLICATION
WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 2, 1985 • 75 CENTS

Industrial buildings to rise where famed flyers made aviation history

"...if you're not on that plane, you'll regret it. Maybe not today and maybe not tomorrow. But some day, and soon, and for the rest of your life."

By Roger Vincent

Ingrid Bergman, teary-eyed and trembling, listened to this admonishment from Humphrey Bogart, while a loudly idling plane carrying her husband waited on the airport tarmac. As we know, she left Rick behind (they would always have Paris) and boarded the plane just in time to escape before the Fascists closed in on the Glendale airport.

That's right, Glendale substituted for Casablanca in one of the best-known films of all time. It was only logical — all airways led to Grand Central Air Terminal, the premier Los Angeles air terminus.

This site of American aviation pioneering has been swallowed by the city, but it lives on as an industrial park now experiencing a minor rebirth.

Property owners Prudential Life Insurance Co. and Property Management Systems are about to embark on a development project at Grand Cen-

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GRAND CENTRAL

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tral Industrial Center that will be a first for both companies — ground-up construction.

A cavernous 98,000-square-foot hangar building adjacent to Bogie's terminal is about to be razed to make way for four new buildings containing a total of 94,000 square feet for warehousing or light assembly use.

Prudential investment manager Hai-Ou Yang values the project at $4 million to $5 million. It will replace a 56-year-old hangar Yang describes as functionally obsolete.

In its prime it served as a garage to a gallery of aviation pioneers whose names will long outlive the Glendale airport: Wiley Post, Amelia Earhart, Eddie Rickenbacker, Jimmy Doolittle, Howard Hughes and even Charles Lindbergh.

More recently, the hangar served as a secret research lab for Disney, where scaled down amusement park rides were created and tested before their installation in Anaheim, Florida and Japan.

"It was a secured area," says publicist Jim Riehman. "You just couldn't get in there. It's where all Disney's theme park skulduggery and creative engineering was done."

Demolition will start within two weeks and the new buildings will be ready for occupancy by next March, according to Grubb & Ellis brokers Wayne Saldana and Ed Palmer, who will handle leasing.

It will be the first in a series of measures to upgrade Grand Central Industrial Center, which has been changing during the past five years from manufacturing use to light manufacturing and industrial office use, says Gary Bedian of PMS.

The property covers 100 acres of industrially zoned land bordered by San Fernando Road, Flower Street, the Golden State Freeway and Sonora Avenue. Its 51 tenants occupy 1.8 million square feet in 76 buildings.

One of those is the picturesque terminal, with its Spanish mission-style exterior and art deco interior. It was built with the huge hangar in 1929. In its heyday, the airport was called Grand Central Air Terminal.

It was the first official terminal for Los Angeles and home port to a dozen different air carriers. But that was by no means the beginning.

Glendale folk had front row seats for the opening of the age of air travel. A plane called the California Arrow first droned over the dusty country village in 1906, the year the town was incorporated.

By 1913 Glendale boasted the largest airplane factory in the west, which had five employees. Owner Glenn Martin was much in demand for movie and exhibition work. He is said to have preferred Glendale air for his test flying because it was "the purest and most comfortable to ride upon."

The airport and the community prospered. It was the site of many movie appearances through the years. The studios liked working at Glendale because favorable atmospheric conditions prevailed. Smog had yet to cast its ugly pall over the valley and fog was minimal. They seldom lost a day for want of clear skies.

Although Glendale never became the manufacturing center its proponents envisioned, it nurtured the seeds of one of the Southland's greatest industries. The aircraft from which the Convair/General Dynamics line descended were Glendale productions. So were the first planes to bear the names of Jack Northrop and Howard Hughes. Technology pioneered locally made possible such aeronautical milestones as the Douglas DC-3 and some of the finest military aircraft of the '40s.

When the Battle of Britain had all but wiped out the RAF, the Commonwealth needed more pilots than she could muster. American volunteers were quick to respond. They quietly trained at Glendale and some received high commendations as members of the famed Eagle Squadrons.

The attack on Pearl Harbor turned Grand Central into an armed camp. One side of the airport was given over to the overhaul and repair of training aircraft; the other side was a P-38 base. The distinctive wail of turbocharged Allison V-12s, thrilling to younger ears and the bane of older ones, was a comfort to all when a Japanese invasion seemed imminent. Late in 1942, with the arrival of the 318th Fighter Wing, the P-38 outfit switched to operational training.

But there had always been elements hostile to the airport and in the long run they prevailed. The runway was shortened after World War II, effectively preventing its utilization by new generation transports. The Grand Central Aircraft Co., still the city's largest employer, continued for a time, but the decline began in earnest after the Korean War. Taxes escalated and income from supporting industries and services failed to keep pace. By 1959, it was all over for the airport.

It became Grand Central Industrial Center in the '60s and the Burbank/Glendale Airport less than four miles away became the city's air service center. □